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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 02 TEL AVIV 001370

SIPDIS

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TAGS: [KWBG](#) [KPAL](#) [KDEM](#) [PREL](#) [PGOV](#) [GZ](#) [IS](#) [ISRAELI](#) [PALESTINIAN](#) [AFFAIRS](#) [GAZA](#) [DISENGAGEMENT](#)

SUBJECT: ASSASSINATION OF ARAFAT AIDE IN GAZA CITY -- LAW
AND ORDER, GAZA STYLE

REF: TEL AVIV 0776

Classified By: Pol/C Norm Olsen, per 1.4(b) and (d).

1. (C) Summary: The March 2 assassination of Khalil al-Zaban, Yasir Arafat's advisor on human rights and media issues, is but the most recent in an ongoing series of events that indicates a decline in law and order in the Gaza Strip. Neither the killers nor their motives have been identified. Somewhat but not wholly indicative of what many perceive to be an ongoing jockeying for power among different factions of the PA and Fatah, armed militants or gangs are also using their muscle to look out for themselves, demanding jobs, land and other benefits from what contacts call an increasingly fractured Palestinian Authority in Gaza. Others may be simply settling old scores. Security services shrink from challenging the offenders because they are either unwilling to confront rivals or are themselves worried about crossing someone from whom they themselves might need assistance in the future. End Summary.

Arafat Advisor Gunned Down

2. (C) Khalil al-Zaban, a journalist and advisor to Yasir Arafat on human rights and the media, was assassinated in Gaza City in the early morning hours of March 2. Al-Zaban headed the PA's government-appointed NGO Council and published its monthly newsletter, al-Nashra ("The Bulletin"). Neither the killers nor their motives have been identified. A prominent journalist acquainted with al-Zaban called him thoughtful and an individual upon whose opinion Arafat relied heavily. A behind-the-scenes type in recent years, al-Zaban was at one time noted for his open criticism of Islamic militancy and for his support for Palestinian prisoners being held in Syrian jails. Al-Zaban was also known, however, to have been aggressive in attacking in print those critical of the PA, particularly on human rights. Both PA police and Arafat's Force 17 are investigating the crime, and Arafat convened both the cabinet and the National Security Council (NSC) March 2 to coordinate the investigation.

"Gangsters on the Margins"

3. (C) Although al-Zaban had been an Arafat loyalist since at least the PLO's days in Tunis, it is not entirely clear to what extent al-Zaban's assassination is related to the efforts of various Gaza factions and individuals to garner power. Gaza pundits across the spectrum commented on his death more in light of the weakening of the PA in Gaza and the growing fragmentation of the security situation, than as an event with a message in its own right. Similar to the attack on PA Police Chief Ghazi al-Jabali several weeks ago (reftel), this attack is being viewed among some Gazans as further evidence that personal scores in Gaza can now be settled with impunity. While the lack of a legal penalty for violent attacks is hardly new in Gaza, contacts cite an increased level of anxiety among the public regarding the state of law and order.

4. (C) Militants, or "gangsters on the margins" as one observer put it, appear increasingly inclined to use force of arms to achieve results. Other recent incidents include the forced entry into the Offices of the Lands Authority February 24 by approximately 20 armed men. Details of the incident remain murky, but the men apparently demanded that the office issue them titles to land in the Gaza Strip, an action they claimed was authorized by Yasir Arafat. The PA had previously issued such land titles to senior PA security officials and these inactive or fired security officers reportedly felt that they were entitled to the same benefits. The head of the Lands Authority, Frayh Abu Middyayn, told Poloff that it was "simply impossible to carry out business in such an environment," and the office closed down for a week, re-opening only on March 3. The forced entry February 28 to the television and radio station in Ma'en by militants demanding jobs is another example. Left unpaid by their unidentified patron in Khan Yunis, the men were reportedly seeking to be entered on the PA payroll at the station to augment or at least ensure their income. The bottom line in all of these incidents, some of which were likely the result of personal grudges, is the impunity of the perpetrators.

15. (C) The security forces, if not complicit, have demonstrated little interest in reining in either independent actors or their rivals from the militias and possibly sparking a wider confrontation. While the attack on the Gaza Police Chief is indeed evidence of the breakdown of law and order, those more intimately acquainted with the actual event stressed that the score being settled between Jabali and his attackers was personal, having to do with reinstating men previously dismissed from the police, rather than a larger showdown between various security services. What was noteworthy about the attack, contacts say, was that the perpetrators felt empowered enough to carry it out in broad daylight and that there were no subsequent arrests or reprisals.

16. (C) When asked who was in a position to improve the situation, Fatah moderate and Deputy Minister of Housing Marwan Abdul Hameed dismissed Muhammad Dahlan's chances of exerting a unifying influence over the panoply of security services in Gaza, adding that Dahlan was strong enough to be a spoiler only. Warming to his subject, Hameed assessed that the man to run security in Gaza is Nasir Yusuf, whom Arafat rejected when he was nominated for Interior Minister in Abu Ala,a,s government. Hameed said that Yusuf, whom he said is originally from Gaza, has the proper background, the Islamic credentials in the eyes of the public to face off Hamas, and is a Fatah stalwart. Hameed opined that it was Arafat's fear of Yusuf's possible success in Gaza, and subsequent potential to challenge Arafat himself, that prevented Arafat from appointing him to the task.

Comment

17. (C) Perhaps more hopefully than realistically, contacts say that al-Zaban's murder may give Arafat pause in a way that previous incidents had not, particularly as it comes hard on the heels of the Fatah Revolutionary Council meeting in which more reform-minded Fatah members such as Hameed were openly critical of Arafat's unwillingness to control, among other things, the security situation in the territories.

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